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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and justifies The Schools Reaching Out Project on the basis of research proving that urban families and communities that build stronger connections to the schools are linked to healthy child development, the academic and social success of children in school, better teaching, cost savings and improved educational services and deliveries, and effective citizen (parent) involvement in educational policy. Two elementary schools will be engrossed in efforts to improve the involvement of families and the community to enhance school effectiveness--the David A. Ellis School in Roxbury in Boston, and PS 111 on West 53rd Street in New York City. Linked with this two-school effort is a 19-member national commission to oversee the project. The project's proponents hope for three outcomes: First, a substantial cadre of classroom teachers will be encouraged to facilitate improved school-family-community connections. Teacher training programs will infuse teachers with the skills necessary to succeed in this endeavor. Second, family and community activities will be linked to school reform. Finally, grassroots advocacy in the wake of family-community involvement will lead to shared responsibility for educational improvements and school reform. (JAM)

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March 9, 1989:

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee

I appreciate the opportunity of appearing before the Select Committee. For fifteen years at the Institute for Responsive Education, we have been studying the relationships between schools, families, and communities. We are advocates as well as researchers. We believe that when families and communities have stronger connections with the schools everyone benefits -- the children, families, teachers, schools, the communities, and our democratic society.

Benefits of School, Family, Community Linkages

Scores of studies by competent researchers in this country and overseas, over the past two decades have confirmed these benefits.

We know that family and community involvement is linked to healthy child development and to academic and social success of children in school.

We know that family involvement in education can contribute to the personal development and empowerment of the adults involved, and to their increased appreciation of their

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important roles, strengthened social networks, access to information and materials, personal efficacy, and motivation to continue their own education.

We know that increased parent and community involvement can bring multiple benefits to teachers and schools: The teachers' work can be more manageable; parents who are involved have more positive views of the teacher and the school, and parents and others who participate are likely to be more supportive of the schools.

Increased linkages between school and community have been shown to have multiple positive results: increased access to school resources and facilities, cost-saving and improved services through collaboration, increased capacity to solve community problems, and community pride.

Parent and citizen participation in the schools also can contribute to advancing the prospects of a more democratic and equitable society. For example, increased opportunities for participation in school decision-making contributes to skills of individual and collective empowerment, important ingredients for effective citizen action in all arenas of civic life.

Barriers to Realizing the Benefits

Despite all of these benefits many American public schools -- including most urban schools --have weak connections with the families and communities they serve. Most have had a tradition of isolation.

We also know that low-income families and communities are often less able to realize these important benefits than other families and communities. There are serious social class barriers which inhibit good relationships between schools and communities.

Our studies show that most low-income families have few no connections with their children's school, except occasional negative messages when a child is in trouble.

However, there appears to be an increased awareness on the part of educators and policymakers that such connections are needed if we are going to be able to reduce the high levels of academic and social failure among poor children in urban schools today. More educators and political and corporate leaders are acknowledging that these high rates of failure amount to a major national crisis -- a social, economic, and political peril of great importance.

I see great danger in continuing to have a two-tiered society

one affluent, generally well-educated and optimistic; the other poor, increasing isolated, badly educated, and despairing.

The schools can't solve these problems alone; neither can low-income families. Schools and families both need each other and they need other community resources and support. Over the past few years, there have been many useful studies and reports that point to ways that progress can be made. At the Institute we have looked hard at the research and at the projects and efforts in many schools in cities and other countries, and have constructed a project which we call Schools Reaching Out, which attempts to draw on the research and projects of many other people and organizations. I believe that the ideas guide this project, its activities, and the research that we are doing over the next year and a half may be useful to other schools and to policymakers, including this Committee as it seeks to address the complex problems of urban schools.

The Schools Reaching Out Project

The project has two parts:

* Two elementary schools-- the David A. Ellis School in Roxbury in Boston and PS 111 on West 53rd Street in Manhattan in New York's Community District 2, that are trying a wide variety of old and new approaches to involving families and the community in order to improve the effectiveness of the school.

* Linked with the two schools is a nineteen member

national Commission, including some well-known researchers and educators to oversee the effort, give it some credibility, and national attention to the need for stronger positive connections between schools, families, and communities.

We have obtained two years of funding from five foundations--MacArthur, Lowenstein, JM, Diamond, and the Boston Globe. The schools began their work in October -- a major five part research and evaluation plan will begin this spring -- and the project will culminate with a national conference and several reports in May of 1990.

In this project we seek to answer these question: Can practitioners use research to change their ways of thinking and working in a complex arena such as school-family relations? Can better connections between urban schools, low income families, and communities help to increase the academic and social success of all children?

I want to identify some of the elements of the project by telling you about the main intellectual roots and themes of the effort and to suggest concerns and three policy objectives that might be of some interest to this Committee.

Research Links to Practice

James Comer

First among the intellectual roots is the work of James Comer and his colleagues at the Child Study Center at Yale and in the Baldwin and King Schools in New Haven. Comer has demonstrated that to improve urban schools it is not enough

to aim only at the intellectual and academic development of children -- that their social, emotional, physical development are inescapably linked to the intellectual. Comer's mental health team approach involves teachers, specialists, parents, and community agencies. Comer's work has produced a tested process model which leads to both a new curriculum and a new school climate -- to motivate at-risk children to achieve at a much higher level both socially and academically.

I see Comer's model as stressing a wide variety of forms of parent involvement -- in the school and at home -- but none of them are ends in themselves, all of them are geared to increasing social and academic success of children.

For our Schools Reaching Out project -- we have drawn on Comer for three different features:

-- The schools are seeking to draw in social service and mental health services from the community to help both the children and the families.

-- The program focuses on parent activities both outside of the school and in the school -- using paraprofessional parent support workers or home visitors to go to homes to provide parent education, support, and information.

-- The program fosters a wide variety of styles and timing for parent and community involvement and trying to discover the links between all of these and the social and academic success of children.

Joyce Epstein

A second important intellectual debt for us is to Joyce Epstein's research which has confirmed the clear achievement advantages for children whose parents are actively involved in supporting the teacher's instructional goals and the clear advantages for teachers who actively seek parent involvement and support.

Epstein's studies and her emerging theory stress the key role of classroom teachers in school links with families. She has also recognized how important it is to give teachers specific, practical help in how to draw parents in to the learning process.

Three important parts of Schools Reaching Out project borrow from Epstein's work:

-- In each school there is a Key Teacher, who is a classroom teacher from that school who has been freed from teaching for two years -- paid for by the school district -- to be a specialist in school community relationships and to work full time making linkages with families and with other community agencies.

-- Project funds are available to support classroom teachers' efforts to develop materials which can be used at home to support the instructional goals of the teacher. In this part of the project we also build on the work of Dorothy Rich and the Home and School Institute. They were the

pioneers in developing plans and materials to help parents become more effective as teachers of their own children.

--The project provides funds for teacher training and staff development activities -- including trips to other schools, workshops, and courses -- to help teachers develop skills, attitudes, and materials and most importantly new mind-sets about shared responsibility for teaching and learning.

We find very useful Joyce Epstein's idea that teachers must be the main carriers of a more positive connections between schools and families and her multi-part typology of parent activities.

The Schools Reaching Out project's activities can be divided into five types:

* school support for families
* family support for schools and teachers
* school-family communication
* activities to assist parents to help their own children at home.
* parent participation in decision-making about school issues, problems, and programs.

My own work over the past few years leads me to conclude that these five types of activities are interrelated and are either mutually supportive or mutually destructive.

Bronfenbrenner and Cochran

Another vital intellectual source of our effort is the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner and Moncreiff Cochran at Cornell University, who have developed and tested an ecological theory to explain the systemic relationships that exist in the child's world. They see the child as being a part of a complex set of institutions -- family, neighborhood, community, school, church, social service agency, city, state -- each influencing the children and all interconnected.

The problem for poor children is that these connections are usually not very good and we expect them and their families to negotiate and navigate among these differences in ways that would befuddle a high paid lawyer.

Bronfenbrenner and Cochran have tested their theories in a large-scale study of parent support interventions with poor and working class families in Syracuse, using home visitors and parent support clusters.

Their interventions have empowerment as the core purpose and are based on the idea that all families have strengths as well as problems and that cultural diversity can be a resource, not a "problem" to be solved or a disease to be "cured."

Their interventions were shown to be effective in terms of parent motivation about learning, the creation of

working support networks, and child rearing competence. From Bronfenbrenner and Cochran, we have borrowed for our project the ecological perspective which doesn't allow us to blame any single part of the child's world, which rejects the deficit model of poor children and families, and puts a high premium on building working connections between and among the various institutions.

Of central importance to our project are the parent support workers, a major effort to tap and make working arrangements with other health and social service agencies, and an emphasis on building positive intercultural awareness on the part of teachers and parents.

David Seeley

We also owe a major intellectual debt to David Seeley, who in his book Education through Partnership and many other articles and speeches calls for a new vision of education -- in which responsibility for the development of all children is shared by school, students, family, and community. Seeley asserts that the key missing element in many efforts for urban reform is a real commitment to the fact that all children can succeed -- and the political will to act on this commitment.

A major focus on the research in our project will be to try to see how connections are made between families, schools, and communities that appear to contribute to the success for

all children objective.

However, our project is not able to make an important contribution to building the political commitment necessary to provide the policies and resources needed to achieve such a far reaching objective as success for all children. Outside pressure and support will be needed. I want to comment briefly about the policy implications of this at the close of this statement.

IRE Study in Boston, Portugal, and Liverpool

The project also draws directly on my own study for the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) in Liverpool, Boston, and Portugal, which was based on about 350 interviews with low-income parents and teachers to find out about the relationships between low income parents and schools and teacher attitudes about socially marginal families and parent attitudes about teachers and schools.

The results in all three countries were remarkably similar. Some of the most important findings in this study are being built into our project. These include:

1. The fact that in all three countries most of the low income parents and little or no contact with the school and what communication there is negative. Most of the parents hear from teachers and school officials only when their child is in trouble.

2. Low-income parents don't consider themselves hard-to-reach. They will come to the school when asked for a good reason, but by and large they don't come on their own, and many -- perhaps most -- carry bad memories of schools and

talk about being intimidated by teachers and administrators. Most say they simply don't like to go to a school.

3. Teachers in all three locations of the study have a deficit view of low income families and their communities. They tend to believe that low-income people do not value education highly, that they have little to offer to the education of their own children.

This exploratory work supports the results of the research of sociologists such as Warner and Lareau. Lareau's study in a middle class and a working class school in California underlines the cultural capital theory -- which links social class with styles and quantity of parent involvement in the school.

The theme of negative expectations was clear -- One Portuguese teacher said, "As soon as I saw the mother, I knew that boy would have trouble in school." A Boston teacher said. "We do the best we can. But what can you expect of these children. Look at the homes they come from."

4. Many low income parents have similarly low expectations for themselves and for their children -- although they almost uniformly expressed strong interest in their child's education. Most doubt their ability to become effectively involved in their own children's education. Many said they would like to learn more about how to help.

Some of the elements of Schools Reaching Out project that are drawn from from the results of my three-country study.

Specifically --

* Recognizing that it is important to give parents a sense of ownership and welcome, we have in each school a parent

center -- a converted classroom -- which is seen by the parents as theirs and is a location for informal social gatherings as well as workshops and courses.

* We emphasize activities -- through the parent support workers at home, workshops in the school, and trips -- to increase the "cultural capital" of the family at least in a small way and to build self-esteem and self-confidence.
* To increase the sense of ownership and self-worth, we are we are stressing the involvement of parents in decision-making in the school -- including the steering committee that has responsibility for the Schools Reaching Out project, parent associations, and the School Improvement Council. These groups are potentially important as mechanisms which make possible parent participation in planning, problem solving, and setting policies. We realize that these groups often fall far short of their promise, but the potential is there.

* The project is trying to foster the interest of teachers in providing guidance and materials for parents to help their own children at home.

In a year and a half we will be able to report on how all of these intellectual roots have flowered in practice in two urban schools.

Three Concerns

As I review the current literature and practices across the

country look at the promising work being done in the two schools in the IRE project, and note how fashionable the topic of school-community-family relationships has become. I have several concerns which have policy implications. I want to mention just three of these.

1. The first is the tendency in some quarters to trivialize parent involvement -- to see it as something which is very "nice," but not very significant in the "big world of school reform." There is some tendency to conceive of the aim as a series of events, meetings, and activities, and to overstress the traditional forms of involvement -- attending meetings. and cultural and social events planned by the school, and informational workshops for parents.

The connections between families, schools, and communities are not yet seen as vitally related to the premier social task of breaking the link between poverty and social and academic failure for so many poor children -- the task of reforming the education process so that all children can achieve success (not just some of them).

My nightmare is that those of us who are advocates of parent involvement and citizen participation will succeed too well and see a big of interest, events, projects, and talk about parents, parent choice, family support, and parent involvement -- an encouraging array of books, reports, and activities in more and more schools -- and still find that a

substantial proportion -- perhaps 25 or 30 or 35% percent of our children are failing and leaving school ill prepared for socially productive lives, for continued education, for work, or for democratic citizenship.

The point is that parent involvement should not be viewed in anyway other than as one of many needed connections between schools, families, and communities which might contribute to social and academic success for all children.

All of these connections should be viewed only as one part of an overall effort to reform educational structures and attitudes -- not as ends in themselves.

My second concern is about the realities of organizational change. In projects such as ours and many others -- we build high expectations on the part of policymakers, foundation officials, teachers, and administrators for change, reform, and dramatic results.

Yet, yet we know how difficult organizational change is -- in any organization -- and especially in urban schools plagued as they often are by the poor conditions, skepticism about the possibility that new ideas will work, bureaucratic and financial constraints, traditions that work against collegial planning and problem solving, and suspicion about research and researchers and "change-agents" from the outside.

The expectations are high, but the realities work against

change at the same time that they dramatize the need for it. This is simply a dilemma, and a contradiction, and a warning to policy makers as well as to educators.

My third concern flows directly from the second. In this time when collaboration and partnerships and from-the-bottom-up reform efforts are being touted all around -- such as in our Schools Reaching Out project -- it is important to remember that outside pressures and demands are needed if social or organizational change is to occur -- and if education is to win any great leap-forward in the public's willingness to pay a higher bill.

Without pressure FROM THE OUTSIDE -- in the form of laws, mandates, and citizen organizations demanding change, and parent and citizen protests of inadequate school results -- organizations like schools are not likely to be able to overcome the built in inertia that defeats change.

Without organized public dissatisfaction, politicians are unlikely to make substantial shifts in the allocation of public resources.

This points to the need for a pincer movement -- work inside schools such as our Schools Reaching Our project and work outside the schools by grassroots parent and community organizations to press for school reform and improved results. The outside pincer has to be citizen-initiated and citizen controlled, not dependent on the support or

financing of school officials.

Policy Objectives

The above description of the main elements and intellectual roots of the Schools Reaching Out project and my addendum of concerns leads to suggest very briefly three clusters of policy objectives for the consideration of the Committee.

1. TEACHERS AND TEACHER TRAINING

Policies are needed which will lead to the development and deployment of a substantial cadre of classroom teachers who are specialists and advocates for improved school-family-community connections and who have the skill and the knowledge to work with fellow teachers, principals, parents, and community agencies.

Such teacher specialists in family and community relationships would be comparable to teacher specialists in computers or in dance or art. They would, of course, need to be given time during the school day to do their work, along with a small amount of logistical support such as a telephone, supplies, a place to work, and access to training and information.

A related policy objective is to induce many of the colleges and universities which educate teachers to infuse into their curriculum specific and effective training for all

prospective teachers to equip them to work sensitively with a diversity of families and with other community organizations and agencies. Most teacher preparing institutions appear to do very little about this area now, except for some of the programs that specialize in preparing pre-school and early childhood staff.

2. LINKING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES TO SCHOOL REFORM

Policy interventions to foster school, family, and community connections should seek to link these activities to broader efforts to change school structures and curriculum. Similarly, policy interventions seeking to aid schools to make broad changes in order to address the severe problems of the social and academic failure of large number of urban children should always seek to have these efforts include parent involvement, family support, and community outreach work.

Two assumptions underlie this policy objective: 1) Efforts at school reform in schools serving low-income children are not likely to succeed unless they include family and community linkages; and 2) Efforts to foster parent, family, or community outreach activities are not likely to make a significant difference unless these activities are done in such a way as they contribute to broader goal of achieving academic and social success for all children.

3. GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY FOR SCHOOL REFORM AND IMPROVED RESULTS

It is important to find ways to encourage and support the development of substantial urban grassroots advocacy for improving schools and for increased school accountability for the success of all children.

The policy objective is to build up the demand side of the school reform equation and move that demand to a broader base beyond the elite groups of researchers, academics, task force and commission members, legislators, corporate leaders, writers, and school officials who now constitute the core of the reform effort.

Both neighborhood and citywide organizations advocating school reform and accountability are needed as a part of a pincer movement along with inside school system efforts such as the Schools Reaching Out project described in these remarks. By grassroots organizations I mean tenants organizations, neighborhood and settlement houses, neighborhood associations, community development organizations and multi-service centers, children's services organizations, racial, ethnic, and religious organizations.

Final Comment

I want to commend Chairman Owens and the Committee members and staff for focusing attention on the necessary connections between school reform and parent involvement, family support, and community-school linkages.

I cannot overstate my sense of urgency about the need to accelerate the pace of change and improvement. This requires a new sense of urgency on the part of educational leadership at all levels, on the part of the political leaders in Washington, and in the states, and on the part of the public.

Perhaps most of all, it requires a commitment to a new kind of shared responsibility for the development and welfare of all children, and especially for those who are most at-risk for social and academic failure.

Creating more and better connections between all the parts of the child's world is one promising place to start, and it is something we know how to do if we have the political will to it.